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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/FO, ELA, NEA/IZ  
NSC FOR SHAPIRO/MCDERMOTT/PHEE/VROOMAN

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PMIL](#) [IZ](#) [SY](#)  
SUBJECT: GAUGING SYRIAN VIEWS OF RISING REGIONAL TENSIONS

REF: DAMASCUS 456

Classified By: CDA Chuck Hunter for reasons 1.5 b and d.

11. (S/NF) Summary: After briefly showing signs of more constructive policies towards its neighbors earlier this summer, Syrians are expressing shock over rising tensions in the region and perceive "anti-Syrian forces" at work. The Syrian Government's response has been to harden its position toward Lebanon, Iraq, and Israel. Asad's recent visit to Tehran and his hosting of Venezuelan President Chavez evoked the language of resistance, criticism of Western interference, and images of Syria's days in isolation. At the same time, Syrian contacts welcomed recent gestures from Washington to ease the application of some sanctions and advance the goals of comprehensive peace, and they hope U.S.-Syrian relations do not suffer because of regional trends. They nonetheless perceive mixed signals in statements by U.S. officials, see a lack of progress toward rejuvenating the Golan or Palestinian tracks, note the absence of high-level official visits to Damascus, and wonder why there has been no visible action on the U.S. promise to return an ambassador. Syrian officials believe they demonstrated an intent to participate in the trilateral border assessment initiative; now, they might insist, it is Washington that is renegeing. End Summary.

12. (S/NF) This cable is the first of a two-part series on engaging Syria over the next six months that focuses on assessing Syrian views of recent regional developments and U.S.-Syrian relations. It should be read in conjunction with a second cable on developing a six-month engagement plan.

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Syrian Policy Toughens  
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13. (S/NF) Only six weeks ago, in late July, most of our Syrian contacts were upbeat about regional trends. The government was actively pursuing better relations with Iraq, and it was engaging Saudi Arabia on the prospects of a new majority-led government in Lebanon. While the prospects of renewing negotiations with Israel on the Golan track appeared dim, Syrians could take some comfort in U.S. efforts to push Israel to implement a settlement freeze and with Washington's

commitment to achieving comprehensive peace. The month of August, however, witnessed a series of events that exposed continuing tensions in Syria's relations with its neighbors. Syrian officials adopted a defensive posture that did not acknowledge Syria's role in stirring the problems escalating in the region.

-- Lebanon: Syrian officials made public statements recognizing the June 7 election results and expressed a willingness to work with the Lebanese government. The SARG then retreated into a huff after Mustaqbal Party leader Saad Hariri and Saudi King Abdullah decided it would be better to hold off any visits to Damascus until after the Lebanese majority formed a government. Signs of Syrian interference soon followed. On August 5, Syrian VP Shara hosted Lebanese Tawheed leader Wiam Wahhab, a strong pro-Syrian proxy inside Lebanon, for a three-hour meeting. Wahhab returned to Lebanon and leaked to the pro-Syrian daily al-Ahkbar that Shara had declared Democratic Gathering bloc leader Walid Jumblatt to be welcome in Syria. Three days earlier, Jumblatt had announced his departure from the March 14 coalition, effectively undermining Hariri's efforts to form a government. Syrian officials continued to claim Syria had no role in internal Lebanese politics, but Saudi envoys stopped coming to Damascus and Washington officials began hinting at a Syrian hand behind the delay in government formation. Syrian frustration flared, with the government-controlled media unhelpfully suggesting on August 21 that the inability of Lebanese political players to form a government could create a security vacuum that might require a return to the Doha process that had (temporarily) resolved Lebanon's political crisis in May 2008. Subsequently, Syrian President Bashar al-Asad continued to insist to a steady stream of European visitors -- notwithstanding the inferences that could be drawn from his ambassador to Lebanon's making his first public appearance after meeting in late August with former President Lahoud -- that Syria was not interfering in Lebanon's internal affairs and that the Lebanese "needed time" to reach a deal "by themselves."

-- Israel: Syria's confrontational position has hardened considerably since PM Netanyahu's government made clear its preference for direct negotiations on the Golan without preconditions. Syrian officials have shared their frustrations publicly and privately over the Israeli tendency to ignore the commitments of previous governments on the Golan. Asad has made clear Syria will not move to direct negotiations without Israeli agreement to six geographical references along the June 6, 1967 border. Privately, we have heard Asad has expressed his doubts that negotiations with Israel can resume with the current Israeli government. Publicly, Syrian officials have described Israel as an "obstacle" to peace. Israel's recent announcement of a decision to authorize the construction of some 450 units in the West Bank has prompted Syrian observers to doubt whether the U.S. can achieve its regional policy goals.

-- Palestinians: Syria's relationships with various Palestinian factions continue to emphasize balance and the need for consensus. The SARG hosted a positive visit by Palestinian Authority (PA) Mahmoud Abbas in early July, encouraged other Palestinian groups not to protest Abbas's presence as they had done during previous visits, and persuaded Hamas Politburo Chief Khaled Meshaal to delay and moderate a speech in response to PM Netanyahu's elaboration of controversial conditions upon which Israel would pursue a two-state solution. The SARG also reportedly encouraged Fatah delegates from Syria and Lebanon to attend the August Fatah Congress in Bethlehem, while unsuccessfully lobbying Hamas to allow delegates from Gaza to attend. Syria has rejected, however, international calls for Hamas to agree to Quartet principles calling for recognition of Israel, acceptance of previous PA peace commitments, and renunciation of violence.

-- Iraq: Showing signs of progress after PM Maliki's August 18 visit to Damascus, Syrian-Iraqi relations took a nosedive after the August 19 bombings in Baghdad and subsequent Iraqi

allegations that former Iraqi Baathist regime elements, acting with Syrian support, were responsible for the attacks.

After Iraq recalled its ambassador "for consultations," Syria followed suit but without any "for consultations" qualifier. President Asad termed the GOI accusations "immoral" and demanded proof. SARG officials dismissed Iraqi information regarding foreign fighters and former regime elements (FREs) in Syria as a subject of past discussions. Asad is reportedly focused on discrediting the Maliki government's allegations of SARG involvement in the August 19 attacks. Taking the set-to very personally, Asad would not mind at all if Maliki lost his job in the January 2010 Iraqi elections. Meanwhile, Syria continues to support selected FF networks and defend Iraqi FREs in Syria as "political exiles." Syrian officials have taken note of Washington's emphasis on dialogue as a means of resolving the standoff between Baghdad and Damascus, but they remain suspicious that Iraq is using the spat to drive a wedge in Syrian-U.S. ties.

-- Lebanese Special Tribunal (STL): Syrian legal experts and a British law firm have reportedly worked up a long list of grievances against the UN International Independent Investigation Commission (UNIIIC) and the STL for review by the UN Security Council. We understand this report focuses on allegations based on the testimony of discredited witnesses claiming Syria's involvement in the assassination of former Lebanese PM Rafiq Hariri and other Lebanese officials. FM Muallim has publicly criticized the legitimacy of the STL's proceedings.

-- Asad visits Tehran and receives Chavez: On the day of the August 19 bombings in Baghdad, Asad visited Tehran to congratulate President Ahmedinejad on his electoral victory and inauguration. In meetings with Grand Ayatollah Khamanei, Asad criticized Western interference in Iran's political affairs and reaffirmed the depth of Syrian-Iranian ties. Most of Asad's remarks, however, were not published in the Syrian press. Two weeks later, Asad received Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez in Damascus on September 4 to initial trade agreements, criticize Israel, and denounce "imperialist intervention" in the region.

-- Syria continues to ignore the IAEA: Syrian officials appear to believe they can best manage the IAEA's dissatisfaction by ignoring Vienna's latest report documenting their lack of cooperation in resolving questions about al-Kibar.

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#### Syrians Perceive Mixed Signals From Washington

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14. (S/NF) In defense of the SARG's sterner policies, Syrian contacts expressed shock at the coincidence of ill-fated developments that have confronted the country with a series of unexpected challenges. While hopeful Syria's relationship with Washington will not fall victim to regional events, some Syrian contacts are suggesting a plot by "anti-Syrian forces" in the U.S. and elsewhere to undermine rapprochement between Damascus and Washington. Very much desiring that Washington continue its engagement policy, some Embassy contacts have registered concerns about what they perceive as mixed signals coming from Washington:

-- Statements by the Secretary and other officials: A number of Embassy contacts commented that the Secretary's remarks on Syria reported by the Wall Street Journal on August 14 suggested a new tone in U.S. policy. In particular, many Syrians interpreted the statement that "The U.S. wants Syria to help secure the Iraqi border, cease meddling in Lebanon, make peace with Israel, and break with Iran" as a list of accusations and demands rather than as an invitation to dialogue. A Department spokesman's erroneous assertion that a U.S. military delegation discussed Iraqi internal security during an August 12 meeting in Damascus infuriated the Iraqis and, despite a correction and clarification the next day, detracted from our apparent desire to reach agreement quickly on getting to work on a border assessment.

-- Perception of no movement on U.S. ambassador: Syrian contacts reacted in a similar manner when Lebanese daily an-Nahar ran an August 11 article citing a U.S. official as saying "No ambassador (to Syria) would be named before September." Though not usually raised in official exchanges, virtually all of our conversation with Syrians begin with the question, "So when is the new ambassador arriving?" Some contacts wonder whether Washington has decided to delay the selection process to register its displeasure with Syrian behavior.

-- Perceived lack of movement on the Palestinian and Golan Tracks: Syrian officials have characterized U.S. policy to achieve comprehensive peace in positive terms, but they are sharing their pessimism with European and other visitors over whether the U.S. will achieve its objectives. Some Syrians view the recent Israeli decision to authorize construction of new buildings in Jerusalem as the beginning of the end of U.S. efforts to achieve a comprehensive peace agreement.

-- Lack of high-level USG contacts: Bashar's July 4 Sky TV invitation to President Obama revealed what he truly wants from U.S. engagement: prestige and international recognition of his legitimacy. Bashar and other Syrian officials have issued public invitations to CENTCOM Commander General Petraeus and other senior U.S. officials. A recently-departed French Embassy colleague confided Syrian FM Muallim remarked that meaningful U.S.-Syrian engagement could begin only after the U.S. signaled its seriousness by sending high-level visitors.

-- Whither the Trilat: Syrian officials believe they demonstrated an intent to participate in U.S.-proposed trilateral border assessment initiative, reportedly even sending members of its team to the border in anticipation of a suggested August 20 start date before we confirmed the assessment would be postponed. Despite acknowledging how the climate has changed in the wake of the August 19 bombings, the Syrians might now insist that it is Washington that is reneging on the gambit it broached.

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Comment  
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15. (S/NF) September 7 marked the six-month anniversary of the visit to Damascus by NEA A/S Jeffrey Feltman and NSC Senior Director Dan Shapiro, the opening of the Administration's engagement policy with Syria. In those six months, we have seen both positive and negative movement by the SARG. On core issues -- Iran, Hizballah, Hamas, Iraq, the IAEA, and Lebanon -- the SARG position appears to have hardened. At the same time, we have seen some progress in the normalization of our dialogue between capitals and embassies, and we sense Damascus is keen to continue the dialogue in order to establish ties at higher levels. As noted in reftel, it will take patience, persistence and focus to develop a useful dialogue with Syria. We would suggest that Washington consider the development of six-month plan that would take us to the end of a full year of engagement and provide an opportunity to take stock of our policy in March 2010. Post has developed some preliminary ideas it will submit septel.  
HUNTER